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RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 3055
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 000926

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: NO SURPRISES EXPECTED IN UPCOMING
LOCAL COUNCIL ELECTIONS

Classified By: Charge Richard Miles, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY. Central Election Commission and Mejlis officials recently outlined highlights of the upcoming July 26 Gengesh (local council) elections that will be held in rural areas across Turkmenistan. The electoral process for the gengeshes was similar to the process used during the 2008 parliamentary elections. Candidates were nominated by social organizations or the sole political party. There were at least two candidates for each seat. The campaign itself consisted of official posters listing the biographic information and platforms of the candidates, together with some public meetings at which rival candidates make joint appearances. Despite the gengesh's apparently lower status compared to the central and provincial governments, the position of chairman of the gengesh, or "archin," hearkens back to the authority of the emirs of pre-Soviet Turkmenistan. As such, the archin's power in local matters is considerable. The relationship between the central government and local councils is still evolving, with an expressed desire to expand the responsibilities of the gengeshes. The careful government supervision of the gengesh election process would not allow much of a chance for surprise results. END SUMMARY.

ELECTIONS FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN RURAL AREAS

12. (C) On July 23, poloff had separate meetings with Central Election Commission ("CEC") Chairman Murat Garriyev and Chairperson of the Mejlis Committee on Local Representative and Self Governance Bodies Gurbangul Bayramova to discuss the approaching July 26 Gengesh (local council) elections. These elections, which provide members for 646 gengeshes nationwide, take place only in rural areas and villages. Chairman Garriyev explained that the CEC had carried out all necessary preparations for the conduct of elections. Overall, 12,452 candidates had been registered to contest 6,220 open positions. 1,521 polling stations were opened. There are an estimated two million eligible voters. As was the case during the 2008 parliamentary elections, candidates were nominated by social organizations such as the Youth Union and Women's Union, by the Democratic Party, and by groups of citizens. In order to be nominated, the candidate must be a resident of the district in which she or he is

running in order to insure that the candidate is known to the voters. The minimum age for a candidate is 21 years old, which is three years older than the voting age. Garriyev explained that the age difference was to insure that candidates have "a greater sense of responsibility." He indicated that the quality of candidates had improved; previously few had a university-level education. All races are conducted on an "alternative basis," meaning there must be at least two candidates, and some races have three. An election with only one candidate would not be valid by law. The Chairman described this as a post-Soviet requirement for elections at all levels, and stressed its democratic character. The term of office for a gengesh member was reduced from four years to three because, as Garriyev explained, "four years is too long if the office holder is not doing a good job."

OFFICE OF "ARCHIN" PRE-DATES SOVIET ERA

¶3. (C) Following the election, the provincial governor suggests to the elected members of the gengesh, who range in number from five to fifteen depending on the population of the jurisdiction, his choice for the "archin" (chairman of the council). If the newly-elected members of the gengesh do not agree, they can reject the governor's choice, according to Garriyev. The archin is typically older and has obtained a higher education, qualifications that the CEC promotes. He said that it is easier for people who have a profession to work with the public. Many archins are women, and the number of female gengesh members is much higher than previously. The archin plays an important role in local decisions

ASHGABAT 00000926 002 OF 003

involving a broad range of issues, including healthcare, education, housing, and sanitation. Garriyev stressed that it is important for the archin to have great authority. The archin consults with the local council of elders, but that unlike previously, the archin is no longer confirmed by the elders. The archin designates areas of responsibility for the other gengesh members. Garriyev described the archin as the "father of the village" and is expected to look out for the interests of the local population. If people are not satisfied, their recourse is to not re-elect the archin at the end of his term. On the other hand, Garriyev said some archins have been in office for 30 years. A good archin knows all his constituents and delivers on his promises. Garriyev said this type of system pre-dates the Soviet era, but since independence and the introduction of alternative candidates, people have the opportunity to choose the most worthy candidates. Although the gengesh is the lowest level of elected state authority, an archin has the right to appeal to the president in cases where other levels of government were not able to resolve a matter.

PREPARATIONS FOR THE ELECTIONS

¶4. (C) In advance of the elections, the Law on Elections of Gengesh Members was published in both Turkmen and Russian languages and distributed to the polling stations. Garriyev said the government recognized that there are many ethnicities among the voters and it wanted to provide the text of the law in languages understandable to all. For the first time, the CEC also published a gengesh election guidebook for use by election committees at the polling stations. The guidebook contains examples of required forms, diagrams for setting up the polling station properly, and a description of election day procedures.

¶5. (C) According to Garriyev, the election campaign included public meetings with candidates organized by local election committees. Posters were displayed that included the candidates' photos, biographic information and platforms. In the event that no candidate would receive fifty percent plus one vote, there would be a repeat election in two months. The same candidates would be eligible to run again. But Garriyev said that generally one of the candidates wins in

the first round. Certification takes place for candidates and again after the election for the winners. The provincial government is responsible for certifying the selection of the archin. In preparation for the gengesh elections, the UNDP conducted seminars in each of the provincial capitals for members of the local election committees.

LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT WORK INDEPENDENTLY

¶6. (C) Chairperson Bayramova shed a little light on the role of the gengesh relative to other levels of government. She said the gengesh has responsibility for local questions and asserted that each level within the government structure has its work and does not interfere in the work of the others. If a central government initiative to build a school or a hospital, for example, involves a community, the gengesh's role is limited to providing the needed land. Regarding the archin, Bayramova said the office combines the roles of emir (a traditional local ruler) and speaker of the council. She said members of the gengesh can be removed from office for abuse of office or other criminal activity.

¶7. (C) Bayramova mentioned an ongoing UNDP project, begun in 2007, that set up pilot projects in ten districts to provide training for gengesh members. She suggested that the role of gengeshes was a work in progress and that reforms would be introduced on an ongoing basis as needed. She noted a desire on the part of the government to expand the responsibilities of gengeshes, commenting that in her experience there are sufficiently competent people available to serve. She listed the areas of responsibility of gengeshes as economic and social development, preparation and implementation of a

ASHGABAT 00000926 003 OF 003

budget, environmental protection, resource management, and protection of citizens' rights in general. Bayramova was not able to estimate what percentage of local government expenditures were funded by the central government, but twice mentioned a USD four billion government program of rural development to be implemented before 2020.

¶8. (C) COMMENT: From Chairman Garriyev's description of the electoral process for the gengeshes, it closely follows the process for last year's parliamentary elections: multiple, but carefully vetted candidates and a passive election campaign with little to distinguish the candidates. It was interesting to note, however, that the office of the archin pre-dates the Soviet era, and both officials hinted at the special role that this individual plays in the local community, descended from the position's previous absolute authority. Garriyev also pointed out the festive nature of election day, with polling stations providing live music and food. This might be a more compelling reason for rural voters to turn out than the list of vetted candidates with which they are presented. END COMMENT.

MILES